

Sociology Shortcuts

M14. Sampling Terms

Although there are a range of different **sampling techniques**, some sampling terms are common to all.

Target (or general) population - everyone in the group that is going to be researched.

- With *small target populations*, such as group of youths who meet regularly to play football in the park, the target population could easily be the sample (everyone in the group is secretly observed, for example).
- With *larger target populations*, such as the 75,000 fans who attend Manchester United's home games, size and complexity makes it hard to study everyone personally. This is where sampling comes in.

A **sample** is a small proportion of those in the target population. A researcher might choose 1000 United fans to study and, by so doing, try to say something about the behaviour of all United fans (and maybe fans generally...).

Sample size: Rather than think in terms of size - is a 90% sample too large or a 10% sample too small? - a more important question involves **representativeness**. This relates to whether the *characteristics* of the people selected for the sample **accurately reflect** the *characteristics* of the target population.

If the sample group is representative anything discovered about them can also be applied to the target population, regardless of how many - or how few - people are in the sample.

Anything we discover about the sample group can, in other words, be **generalised** to the wider target population: we can make statements about a group we *haven't* studied (our target population) based on the behaviour of a group we *have* studied.

To construct a **representative sample** a researcher normally needs a way of identifying everyone in their target population so an accurate sample can be drawn. This involves using a **sampling frame** (such as a list of names and addresses) to uniquely identify everyone in our target population. **Examples** include:

- **electoral roll:** a list of everyone eligible to vote
- **school registers**
- **professional membership lists:** the British Medical Association (BMA) keeps a register of all doctors in Britain
- **company payroll:** a list of all employees.

For many types of sampling a frame is needed because:

- if everyone in the target population can't be identified the sample may be unrepresentative.
 - to contact people in the sample, a researcher needs to know who they are...
- However, just because a sampling frame *exists*, it doesn't mean a researcher will automatically have access to it. This can be denied for:
- **Legal reasons:** A school, for example, may not give a researcher access to their registers.
 - **Confidentiality:** A business organisation may not give a researcher access to their payroll records.
 - **Anonymity:** Some groups (religions, political parties and criminal gangs...) may not, for a variety of reasons, want to be studied.

Identify a sampling frame for the following and briefly say how easy / difficult it would be to access:

- The voting intentions of people in Dorset
- Families with new-born babies in your home town
- Drug addicts in Newcastle
- Students in your school/college
- British Members of Parliament